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The roots of violence

An Essay on its nature and early developmental determinants

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Violence as an individual phenomenon is traced to its beginnings in the developmental process as one potential expression of the innate aggressive energy which in turn has a combination of structural, genetic and psychological determinants. The early life experience of the individual is found to be the major force in making the decision about whether and how the aggressive drives are expressed in violent forms. There are some constitutional patterns which particularly lend themselves to the more openly aggressive forms of interactive and impulsive individuals. There are environmental shaping forces which can be major influences such as being reared in a setting where violence between people is commonplace. Group pressures and influences can be later determinants. There are specific developmental stages, particularly between two and four years of age when there is active interest in and experimentation with sadistic and other violent forms of interaction and expression. It is during these stages that major decisions are made about whether the aggressive energy is expressed in socially acceptable, useful patterns and interests, or whether they will be anti-social in nature.

Definition (Webster's Unabridged Dictionary) :

Violence An exertion of any physical force as to injure or abuse. It implies intense, turbulent or furious action, often destructive.

VIOLENCE, and in particular violent behavior, has been a national and international problem in a variety of forms since the beginning of nations, with its roots in the behavior of individuals and groups. In recorded history it begins with Abel and Cain. In our recent history it can be identified by almost universally known names such as Oswald, Berkeley, Watts, and Hitler. Its manifestations are manifold, including individuals who are in the violence game for themselves, or as agents for others, or even in disguise as "invitators"

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of violence against themselves, i.e., a kind of "career" as a victim.

Violence, when it takes the form of group violence, ranges from gang, mass, or mob violence to war itself. It can be impulsive or cold and calculated. It can come from within the individual or from without, sometimes resulting from a kind of contagion. It can have a purposeful goal or be apparently senseless. It can be a method of communication, even an expected pattern of everyday, especially close relationships in specific persons or groups. It can thus be contained within the relationship to one individual, adult or child, in a family, or show up in the feuds between individuals, families, clans, gangs or nations. It can be contained in socially acceptable forms such as in sports or exhibitions or in adventure or hunting. It can be turned on the outside world, or, more specifically, society, either directly or indirectly, to achieve movement, change or obtaining specific goals. When it is indirect it can follow patterns of apparent non-violence, most usually within families. In recent history, non-violence, as used by some militant groups, large or small, appears to be calculated to stir up loss of control or violence in others. It can be used to create fear and thus control others.

Expressions of violence usually follow the rules an individual makes for himself. These rules can be with calculated disregard of society's rules and governed only by fear. In spite of usually good, sometimes strict rules for control, there can be impulsive violent action in response to inner or outer pressure created by the situation of the moment thus overwhelming the individual's own standards and basic concepts about control of violence, when it is used in service of the defense of one's life, to protect territorial rights, property, or honor.

As behavioral scientists we are increasingly being asked to take some responsibility for better ways of dealing with these phenomena, especially where violence is evidenced in an increasing problem in our cities in the form of violent crime and riots. As we try to respond by looking at the nature and origins of violence we can see how complex a problem we are being asked to look at if we attempt to supply answers. However, there is always one common denominator we come to when we take a look at the fundamental roots of the problem: the individual and how he came to be the way he is.

It is easy to become overwhelmed and warned away from even considering the problem when we see the literally hundreds and even thousands of combinations of possible interacting factors that determine the end result of any one individual's response to his life experience ending in his own ways of dealing with violence. This approach to the problem does not in any way remove the need to be concerned with the environmental and societal forces which can stimulate or even encourage the individual's use of violence. For example, it has been pointed out that poverty can be responded to as a form of violence to the person. This essay, however, is an attempt to look at the developmental processes involved from the beginnings of the individual's life to try to understand how the person himself comes to have the attitudes he himself presents. If we can understand this process, hopefully, we can work on a plan of preventive approaches and programs for those of us concerned with personality development by applying what we know.

To understand the nature and roots of violence and the end result we must start with the fundamental make-up of the individual. We immediately encounter a controversial area in which there are two opposing schools of thought: on the one hand there is the group that feels that aggression is an innate drive (Freud, 1930; Lorenz, 1966). Greenacre (1960) has taken the added step of attempting to trace its origins to forces which provide the impetus for growth and movement in the prenatal life of the foetus. The opposite view is summarized by Montagu (1968), who is one of the spokesmen for the group who feels that the human is not born with innate aggression. Lately Tinbergen (1968) has attempted to provide a synthesis as did Goren (1968).

This observer, as a developmental psychiatrist, feels strongly that there is not only a basic aggressive drive—as one can see it even in infants—but also there are considerable individual variations from the beginning of life in the quantitative and qualitative patterns of expression of aggressive energy. While at present we cannot be clear about the organic bases for aggressive energy and impulse we have some clues that there are genetic determinants of the amount of such drive in males with an extra Y chromosome (Money, 1969). Frank Erwin (1970) has demonstrated that pathology of the

temporal lobe can be a determinant of episodic violence. In particular it has been shown that temporal lobe epilepsy can be the basis for outbursts of violence as a form of seizure equivalents. We also have some evidence from the work of Weinstein (1953) with brain damaged individuals that there are deep midline brain centers which can act as inhibitors of aggression, especially in its impulsive violent forms of expression, since when damaged, the individual displays impulsive violent behavior. There is also some evidence from lobotomized patients that the frontal lobes have an influence on inhibiting impulses and controlling violent behavior (Lourie, 1971).

There is newer information which provides a basis on which we might understand how the syndrome of minimal brain dysfunction influences the process of controlling aggression. Anohkin (1964) in his studies of "systemogenesis" has demonstrated in birds how there are brain nuclei in clusters responsible for specific functions. These nuclei are not completely activated at birth and contain multiple activating and inhibitory centers. In their sequential maturation there are therefore balances established which allow each function to develop with controls available to provide the basis for avoiding excesses. Can we postulate that if the inhibitory areas of a given nucleus are damaged, controls are more difficult to achieve? This may allow us to understand at least one basis on which some individuals' aggressive expression can more easily become out of control and end as violence.

Even though there is evidence which points to constitutional determinants in the level of aggressive energy available to an individual, from the beginning of life, its fate and its expressions are determined by life experience. It is the influence of the child's external world and his response to it which determines whether this form of energy is expressed in the form of violence. To begin with, when one starts life with a high level of aggression, there can be special problems with the development of inner controls if an imbalance exists from the start. This is particularly true in the individual who is born with organically based distortions in his neurointegrative capacities, making the individual vulnerable to impulse control problems. When there is poor internal monitoring of the impulses and therefore poor ability to control actions growing

out of the aggressive drive, the child's environment, his everyday handling and relationships need to provide the controls to insure appropriate ways in which he responds to the drive. Ideally, there occurs a neutralization of aggression and/or a fusion of the aggressive drives with the others, particularly with the binding power of love. Failure of this neutralization or distorted fusions can result in what is presented to the world as aggressive or violent behavior.

As an example of how this works in life situations, let us begin with a child who has a high level of aggressive energy expressed in motor activity such as is seen in the hyperactive infant. When there is an imbalance between the level of drive and the ability to modulate or otherwise control, it becomes important for such a child to have controls available from the outside since they are not available from within, at least until he can develop his own internal controls (thus, inability to establish controls can represent a developmental delay and is not necessarily permanent). Now, if instead of controls being available, this type of child is overstimulated, the level of drive which can result makes controls even more difficult. When such a child's motor begins to race and his brakes are not available, a pat can become a slap. Grasping an object can end with pushing it and causing it to fall and break. If there are still no controls available from the outside, the end result can be a feeling of helplessness which must be defended against at all costs. Thus, even in the first year of life, a child can establish the defense that hurting or breaking is intentional, not accidental. This is particularly true if other forms of pleasure and satisfaction are not available. A distorted fusion of drives can then take place in which the child says, "I not only want to hurt or break, but it is also my pleasure." Then the basis for violence as part of relationships and response to the environment can become rooted. Another basis on which poorly controlled violent behavior can take place is the over-control of aggressive, even exploratory behavior so that there is no opportunity to experiment with situations in which inner controls are necessary. Margaret Mead (1935, 1969) reports from her work in Bali that massacres result in societies where there is no permission for children to experiment with aggression.

The early aggressive energy is usually utilized to see that the

needs of the organism for growth and safety are met. There is also, as has been mentioned, the use of aggression in pleasurable ways. These fusions can lead to a variety of possible directions in the fate of the aggressive energy such as the use of aggression when survival needs are not met. Thus; some children grow up feeling that the only way one can have survival needs met is by violence. There can then be a fusion of violence with dependency relationships, i.e., the child has learned that aggressive energy should be expressed in violent forms, as well as picture that violence is the only way to create movement and change. From the viewpoint of the pleasurable needs of the human organism, there is considerable evidence from observation that a variety of experiments are carried out with aggressive expression by the infant with more or less intensity and perseverativeness, depending on the individual makeup. The environmental reaction helps determine the end result.

When he acquires his first teeth, the baby experiments with biting. When he becomes concerned about people leaving him at eight months, he turns away from them and causes them to disappear again when they return, thus attempting to deal with helplessness in still another way. When he is discovering his own will, when he is toilet trained, when he is experimenting with sexuality, etc., he tests out how all these experiences can be used as an expression of aggression. Depending on the responses he encounters in these experiments, the outcome seen in some young children is preoccupation with one or another of these ways of expressing aggression. The physically abused child provides another example of identification with a violent form of aggression as a component of relationships which the individual child can make his own. Thus, many child beaters have been beaten children themselves. Still others, as examples of the repetition compulsion, invite and even need hurt as part of close relationships.

The most active experimentation with physical violence begins early in the second year when stamping, kicking and breaking are tentatively tried. The answers to fitting inner controls with societal norms and expectations begins here. One approach that delays appropriate answers or makes them unnecessary is "we must let him express himself." The key time in which the most lasting answers to

what one does with aggressive drives and feelings appears to be between two and three years of age. During this time when the child is able to be exploring how he and his drives fit in with his expanding horizons in his world, he experiments with aggression in more direct forms in sometimes quite violent ways such as the use of sadism and other cruel approaches to aggressive expressions. During this period the young child is preoccupied with forms of being hurt and the ways in which others get hurt. The literature for this age group that has been handed down from generation to generation has many such themes, Jack and Jill fall down the hill; Humpty Dumpty falls off the wall; the cradle falls off the tree. When concerned adults attempt to "clean up" the naked violence and aggression in these nursery rhymes, the young children lose interest in them.

When the environment, including the cultural patterns to which the young child is exposed between two and four years of age, has a large component of violence involved in relationships, these can be readily identified with by the child. This was one of the most difficult areas of adjustment to the nursery groups in the South End study carried out in Boston by Pavenstedt and Malone (1969) as they report it in "The Drifters." Even from a survival point of view, for the young child functioning in a setting where violent behavior resulting from drunkenness or mental illness and psychopathic character patterns provide his daily model for identification, the choice can be to emphasize violence as an integral part of one's own relationship patterns or when faced with situations in which there is the threat of one's survival needs not being met.

It is interesting from the developmental viewpoint to look at the young child's concept of death in the preschool period. As Bender and Schilder (1937) have pointed out and as confirmed by Piaget, "death is not permanent." Bender and Schilder add another component in their studies which shows that the child thinks of death as resulting from violence. Thus, even in our everyday descriptions of illness this concept persists. We talk of illness in terms of attack, seizure, accident, etc.

The methods by which controls are established (by no means comprehensive) involve neutralization of aggression, particularly by making it unnecessary, especially as a survival device, as well

as encouraging healthy and appropriate fusion with pleasurable drives. Sublimations of aggressive and violent wishes if appropriate, can be effective control devices. For example, the child who is free to experiment with aggression can find that if you are not allowed to beat someone up, you can find that there are ways of beating him out instead. This, in turn, can be translated into useful investments of aggressive energy such as ambition and competitiveness.

The prevalent patterns of controlling aggression are accomplished by the use of language to express feelings rather than act them out. Child says "no" to himself as he hits—then with reinforcement, the "no" becomes automatic. Postponing or displacing the pleasure from violence can be accomplished by structuring, such as in games or by looking rather than doing, etc. The latter particularly explains one of the average child's interests in TV violence, and when he grows up, his preoccupation with newspaper headlines of murder and violent crime and the popularity of books such as the detective stories, the "Life of the Boston Strangler," "In Cold Blood" etc. One should also keep in mind the usefulness of this type of vicarious experiencing of violent forms of aggression, but also its most important service as a means of helping the individual to learn how to deal with violence from others. This is particularly important in our current world where many new and increasingly potent and even catastrophic forms of violence are being developed.

There are many variations and combinations of overstimulated aggression and violence and attempts to control which are ineffective. One example is the overstimulated child controlled by fear, which can be effective only in direct violence being taboo. With the continuing pressure for expression of exciting and destructive wishes, the end result can be acting out in indirect ways such as fire setting.

The use of rules as a means of containing and channeling aggression is a very useful device and takes the form of strict repetitive patterns in early childhood even in games and later in "contained, licensed violence" in the form of boxing, football, etc. The development of an appropriate conscience, sense of right or wrong, good or bad, moral judgements, etc., are important control devices which are necessary in healthy personality development. Unfortunately, the child is exposed to not only the rules which fit in with an appro-

priate conscience, but also the "superego lacunae" which are presented to the child in his environment (Johnson and Szurek, 1952), i.e., it learns you must be honest—except with insurance companies or income tax. It is in this context that the respect or disrespect for law is established as well as for the rights of others and property rights. Since superego development and identification involve models found in close relationships, there is an immediate hazard in the development of a proper conscience, and concepts of right and wrong, property rights, respect for rules, etc., in the child who has never learned what it is like to be close to or part of another person. There is some feeling that the only true amoral, asocial, psychopathic personality is the individual who has never learned in the first five years of life what it is like to be part of another person. The entree into the delinquency system where violence can be a way of life, begins at eight or nine.

We should also comment further on the use of fear and reversals as methods used by the individual to control aggression. These fears and reversal mechanisms develop when the child is at the height of experimenting with aggressive experiences, especially in the form of violence and sadism; that is, between two and three years of age. The child's aggressive powers are enhanced by the use of his own magic power. However, this could stir up powerful aggression and violence in others and in the environment. Therefore, fear of bodily damage as a normal area of concern in this age period very often serves as a means of helping the individual make the decision that it isn't safe to be violently aggressive; in fact, it might be better to be passive or turn the aggression on oneself. Here, too, fear can result in still another defensive step where, on a counter-phobic basis, violent aggression may come back into the picture in an attempt to negate the fear. This is often the psychology of the bully.

In all these approaches to finding their own answers, one sees how violence can become acceptable in children who are exposed to distortions in cultural values about dealing with aggression. Where contradictory messages about aggression are offered to them or they experience repeated frustrations or their models or ego ideals are using violence, the end result can be preoccupation with violence as a means of survival or pleasure or an acceptable, expectable way

of life. Finally, there is the violence dictated by mental aberrations, such as mental distortions in perception of reality. This is reflected in paranoid thinking which calls for violent solutions to imagined danger. It is seen in hallucinations which dictate violent behavior. The end result of his early life experience is that each individual has become accustomed to a degree and form of violence. There is a particular type of violence and form of violence with which he has made peace. Each individual has his peculiar level of control and thickness of the veneer over his aggression and his conditions which can allow its breakthrough. The veneer can be dissolved by alcohol. Violence can also be part of group expression to show loyalty. It can emerge also when the individual is faced with fear which can't be solved. There may be a need to be heard and recognized as a person and violence is the only way the individual can get such attention. Violence may also be a show of bravery, to show one's toughness, testing survival skills by taking risks. It can be his way of declaring group unity or his participation to repel invasion of the group from a sub-group or from the "dangers" in the community.

There are two basic approaches which the community has in dealing with socially unacceptable violence; to help an individual establish controls from within or to supply controls from without. When we must resort to controls from without, mostly this is accomplished by creating fears. When this form of fear doesn't work, attempts are made to devise ways of creating more effective fears and more effective external controls which include retaliation and punishment. To put this approach in perspective, it should be kept in mind that even the Biblical admonition of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" is an attempt to modify overpunishing so that the punishment will fit the crime. It has been pointed out that the Biblical admonition is an attempt to remedy the pattern in ancient times in which when a slave attacked his master and destroyed his eye or tooth, he would be killed.

Only too often as behavioral scientists and mental health professionals we are asked by society to help devise new ways of helping individuals establish controls or to rework the control problems in a given individual or group. At the same time there is an understandable reluctance on the part of society to be concerned, as we are, with

the nature and origins of violence as we see them in the earliest years of life. There is a great reluctance for us to look at the savage, which in one degree or another is a part of every human, with a thinner or thicker or more effective veneer of civilization covering it. It is the young child trying to find the answers to aggressive drives in himself who can tap in on the savage, who can scratch the surface and get through the veneer of even the most meek, soft, sweet parents in the world, and tap the underlying violence.

Still if we are to truly have more effective programs for dealing with the problems of violence and crime in our society (as well as institutionalized violence such as war), at least a good part of our effort needs to be aimed at those most important points in life when the young child finds his first and sometimes permanent answers to this part of his world. In Judge David Bazelon's terms: "We are more preoccupied with fire fighting than fire prevention." The community points to the more and more destructive fires that need to be put out right now. By all means we need to have more and better fire fighting, but the much less glamorous job of fire proofing must be a major responsibility if we truly know where the fires of violence begin.

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